Iran's Social Media Contradictions

The social media landscape in Iran is complex and contradictory. Some platforms, notably Facebook and Twitter, are banned while others, such as Facebook-owned Instagram, are not. Despite this, millions of young, tech-savvy Iranians, regularly access blocked platforms using virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxy servers. Adding to the contradictions, Ayatollah Khamenei rails against Western decadence yet like other senior Iranian leaders, he has official pages on Instagram and on the ostensibly banned Facebook and Twitter. Meanwhile, young Iranians use Instagram to post content that is antithetical to the regime's morality and social norms and native social media platforms directly imitate or clone popular platforms while having suspiciously similar lists of "rules". What explains all these contradictions in Iranian social media and the government's attitude to it?

Banned but Accessible

There is a considerable gap between Iran's ambition to control access to social media sites and its capacity to do so. Despite rumours following the nuclear deal with the P5+1 that Facebook and Twitter are set to be unblocked or that some users can assess them, both sites remain officially banned, along with YouTube and other platforms. Nevertheless, Iranians are avid users of social media, and these banned platforms in particular, with anywhere between 4 million and 17 million Iranians thought to be on Facebook. The latter figure, coming from a 2011 interview by Mehdi Jafari, then Chief of the Technology and Information and Cultural Organization for Students of the Basij the volunteer paramilitary forces of the Revolutionary Guard, perhaps reflects official recognition of the futility of attempting to block particular websites. It certainly highlights the plethora of easy-to-use VPNs and proxy servers in Iran that enable individuals to circumvent restrictions; a challenge China's government also faces in its efforts to maintain the Great Firewall.

Tacit recognition has morphed into outright acceptance of the platforms and the government's use of them to articulate its ideology and narrative. Ayatollah Khamenei joined Facebook in 2012 and his page now has 138,000 likes. Khamenei is also on Instagram with 861,000 followers and Twitter with 230,000 followers. President Hassan Rouhani is also on all three platforms with similar levels of following to the Supreme Leader while Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is the government's undoubted social media star with followings far in excess of the President and Ayatollah. This will no doubt fuel claims that Zarif is planning his own tilt at the Presidency following his high profile role in leading Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West.

Active use of officially prohibited social media by the government undoubtedly reflects a keen awareness of their actual and potential audience size as well as the importance of social media as channels through which the regime can spread its ideology and narratives. Posts in Farsi and English are used to presumably reach those Iranians in Iran accessing the sites through VPNs and proxies as well as the Iranian diaspora and the wider English speaking world. The extensive tweeting throughout the nuclear negotiations by the Iranian negotiating team and their Western counterparts shows the importance of signalling on social media as an integral component of modern diplomacy.

Flouting Social Norms and Morality

Alongside prohibited sites, Facebook-owned Instagram remains unbanned in Iran and is wildly popular, particularly with the Iranian youth who use the site in exactly the same ways as their Western equivalents. More interestingly, Iran's youthful urban elite use Instagram to show off their country and flaunt their wealth. The hugely popular @therichkidsoftehran, @richkidsoftehroon and @richkidsoftehran_1 accounts and the #richkidsoftehran hashtag all show young Iranians (particularly women) violating the social norms and strict morality of the Islamic Republic. It is likely that some, if not many, of these users are the scions of politically well-connected individuals in the government; able to afford luxury homes, expensive holidays and fast cars while generally avoiding repercussions from the state.

However, near identical terms and conditions, or "rules", on Iranian social media provides an alternative window into the social media landscape in Iran. A number of domestically developed, predominantly Farsi platforms such as Parsclub and TwittPersia, two microblogging sites, and Facebook Box, a Facebook imitator, share almost identical terms and conditions which you can see here, here and here. Prohibited discussion topics include: criticism of the government or its officials; topics such as prostitution, drug use, suicide or Satanism and any attempts to organise or participate in protests, political movements or illegal gatherings. Similarly singled out for prohibition is the use of VPNs and proxy servers to access sites or content deemed unacceptable.

This extensive list of rules and regulations reflects the government's concerns stemming from the post-2009 election unrest as well as the role played by social media in helping to topple neighbouring governments during the Arab Spring. Broadly defined, much of the content posted by the rich kids of Tehran could fall foul of these rules so the continued online existence of these individuals and groups is curious. Equally interesting is the question of why these sites have near identical rules. Is it simply a case of copying each other? Or is it a centrally mandated list of rules sent out from the government to sites to remind them and their users of their obligations?

Contradictions and Futility

The contradictions inherent to the Iranian social media landscape highlight the mismatch between how the government would like social media to be used and how Iran's technologically well-connected young people actually use it. The prominence of senior leaders on social media is, perhaps, recognition of the fact that the government must be on these platforms if it is to engage, influence and persuade Iranians within Iran and internationally. To date, Iran has yet to properly address the contradiction of its active presence on a platform that it actively blocks. It may continue to avoid doing so. More problematically for the government, its efforts to ban access to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are futile and ultimately self-defeating. In attempting to block them for fear of mass political organisation, Iran alienates its youth population and pushes them to use technologies such as VPNs and proxy servers that enable them to protect their

online identities and engage in hidden political activities. That is a dangerous contradiction for a government fearful of instability in a volatile region.